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TIM O'BRIEN: This report concerns allegations that there are more than 200 Nazi war criminals now living in America, and that collectively they are responsible for the deaths of as many as two million people. This report will also explore how these Nazis and Nazi collaborators came to this country and how they have managed to stay. And it will present evidence which indicates that some of them have been recruited, protected, and even employed by the United States Government.

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O'BRIEN: But beyond those who lied their way into the country, others were actually brought in. Nazis were ardent anti-Communists, and many of them had important military or scientific knowledge. Thus they were considered valuable in the new fight against the Soviets.

SIMON WIESENTHAL: I am sure that during the Cold War was some plan to bring such people and to use them.

O'BRIEN: Documents only recently available prove there was such a plan.

Here at the U.S. National Archives and at government agencies throughout Washington are stored hundreds of thousands of documents concerning the atrocities committed before and during World War II. Many of these documents grew out of U.S. efforts to prosecute Nazis. But some tell of efforts to actually recruit them.

ABC News has learned of one high-level intelligence program that not only allowed war criminals into this country,

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but did so with the official sanctions of our government.

Correspondent Michael Connor investigated the details of that program.

MICHAEL CONNOR: It was called Project Paper Clip. And from the end of World War II to the mid-1950s, it brought more than 900 German scientists to the United States. Classified government documents describe how the Joint Chiefs of Staff administered the program for the American military and the Departments of State and Commerce.

Paper Clip's goal was to recruit and exploit the best of German brain power for use by both the military and American business. Officially, Paper Clip barred active Nazis. But screening procedures were lax, and in some cases negligent. Two separate cases illustrate the point.

The first is the case of Otto Ambrose, shown here on trial at Nuremberg. Ambrose was a chemist and the director of the notorious I.G. Farben Chemical Company, which supplied gasoline and rubber for Hitler's war effort. Ambrose is credited with developing a form of synthetic rubber called Buna, and he played a supervisory role in the construction of Farben's Buna plant in the Polish village of Auschwitz.

For I.G. Farben, Auschwitz concentration camp inmates provided a plentiful source of cheap labor.

One survivor of the Farben plant is author Elie Wiesel.

ELIE WIESEL: Those who could work worked. Those who could not were killed. The work was actually a slow process of death: no food, no rest; only work.

The overseers were Capos (?), the SS, and also civilians. I was in touch constantly with German civilians who were masters. They were in charge of the work projects.

I was very young. I remember those days because probably more often than not I wonder how did I manage to do that much work, to carry stones that were heavier than I was. And...

CONNOR: The Nuremberg prosecution charged that each day at Farben's plant 100 people died from sheer exhaustion.

For his role there, Otto Ambrose was convicted of slavery and mass murder, and sentenced to eight years in prison. But even while on trial at Nuremberg, Ambrose was a target for United States Government recruiters from Project Paper Clip.

As a convicted war criminal, he could not officially

join the program. But Ambrose, American government, and American business cooperated in other ways. His prison sentence was commuted after only three years by American officials, and he was helped in a bid to enter the United States by this man, J. Peter Grace, President of W.R. Grace, a major American chemical company.

This copy of an internal State Department document describes how J. Peter Grace helped Otto Ambrose in his efforts to enter the United States. In a memorandum to the United States Ambassador to Germany, Grace acknowledges that Ambrose was a war criminal. But he adds that in the years he's known Ambrose -- and I quote here -- "We have developed a very deep admiration, not only for his ability, but, more important, for his character, in terms of truthfulness and integrity."

It's not clear precisely what effect this memo had. All we know is that on three occasions -- in 1968, 1969, and 1971 -- the United States State Department waived regulations which should have barred Ambrose from entering the country. And in each of those years, it granted him a special visitor's visa.

Why Ambrose was given special treatment is unclear. Both the State Department and J. Peter Grace refused to be interviewed for this broadcast. However, Grace officials confirmed a business relationship between their corporation and Ambrose.

Today, Otto Ambrose does consulting work for W. R. Grace & Company and lives here in Mannheim, Germany. Ambrose wouldn't agree to a film interview with ABC News. But in a recent telephone conversation, he told me that following his conviction at Nuremberg, he was contacted by American military and scientific personnel. "An army of people came and asked me about my work," he said. "I told them all about it."

In addition, he told me, only months ago United States energy researchers came here to inquire about other aspects of his wartime research. "I'm happy to still be working as a chemist," Ambrose told me. "But it's funny. Now I'm helping the Americans."

Another Paper Clip recruit who worked for the Americans was a doctor, Major General Walter P. Schreiber, the second-ranking medical officer in the German Army and an expert in germ warfare. By 1951, Schreiber was working for the United States Air Force in the School of Aviation Medicine at Randolph Field, Texas. But before being hired by the Air Force, Schreiber narrowly escaped, being prosecuted at Nuremberg.

MAN: There are a number of people that we would have tried, unquestionably, if the thing had been going -- it had kept going another year or two. And the basic reason it

didn't was the Cold War.

O'BRIEN: Members of the Nuremberg prosecution team had collected evidence linking Schreiber with medical experiments at Dachau in which inmates were submerged for hours in tanks of freezing water, and with other experiments on young Polish women at Ravensbruck concentration camp. Here, Nazi doctors inserted wood shavings and ground glass into open wounds in the women's legs to test sulfa drugs. Some of the women died. Others, like Jenina Iwanska (?), have suffered a lifetime of permanent disability. Madame Iwanska now lives in the South of France. She remembers the experiments and she remembers Walter Schreiber.

JENINA IWANSKA: If I recall, yes. I have to tell you the story. Before the experiments took place in Ravensbruck, before we were brought in for the experiments, all 75 of us had to parade in front of a commission. We did not know if they were doctors, if they were SS. The camp commandant was there. This man was there. Everyone was there.

They examined our legs. It was some kind of a parade. We were completely undressed. And if my memory is good, this man was among the group of people who came to select us for the experiments.

O'BRIEN: Evidence such as that forced the Air Force to fire Schreiber in 1952. But not before they had helped arrange his departure.

Where is Walter Schreiber today? ABC News asked that question of a number of governmental agencies, under provisions of the Freedom of Information Act. Some of those agencies sanitized their documents, supposedly to protect Schreiber's privacy. But one 1952 Air Force memo suggests that intelligence agents helped Schreiber get into Argentina.

If the United States' postwar promise to surrender suspected war criminals had been kept, Schreiber should have been sent back to Europe, where he may have been prosecuted. Here, in Ludwigsburg, Germany, officials at the Central Office for War Crimes investigation say that Schreiber's case in Germany is still under active investigation.

Schreiber and Ambrose are only two of the hundreds recruited under Project Paper Clip. Justice Department officials say there are others who may be guilty of war crimes, but who are now living safely in America. Those and other suspected war criminals who came to this country have been virtually immune from prosecution for almost 30 years.

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O'BRIEN: ...According to a General Accounting Office study, seven alleged Nazi war criminals have been employed by the CIA, one by the Department of Defense, and one by the Department of State. In addition, 24 others have had some contact with the CIA or the FBI.

Simon Wiesenthal says this practice started immediately after World War II.

WIESENTHAL: I alone was working with the American organizations like OSS and counterintelligence [unintelligible] and Office of Direct Intelligence. And one day I arrest a man. He was a Ukrainian. And the next day he was free, because in the same time when I arrest him, he was an informer of the military intelligence.

O'BRIEN: Wiesenthal has personally accused this man, Edgars Laipenicks, of war crimes. Laipenicks was once listed by the INS for investigation relating to charges that he killed Jews in Riga prison in his native Latvia. But before an INS investigation could be completed, the CIA appears to have intervened on Laipenicks' behalf.

The CIA denies any interference in war crimes investigations. However, this 1976 letter from the CIA to Laipenicks says, "It is our understanding that INS has advised their San Diego office to cease any action against you. If such does not prove the case, please let us know immediately.

"Thank you once again for your past assistance to the agency."

Author and lecturer Charles Allen has studied Nazi war criminals in the U.S. for years. His evidence and testimony have been used by congressional committees and the GAO. We asked him about Edgars Laipenicks.

CHARLES ALLEN: The INS did drop their proceedings against Laipenicks, despite the fact that the evidence against him is extremely persuasive, and despite the fact that they had already built up a very solid case against him. Laipenicks has disappeared from the section around San Diego where he was found originally. At the moment, he is not on the list of those any action is going to be taken against. And he is not on that list simply because of CIA intervention, in my view.

CONNOR: You think it's that simple.

ALLEN: It's as simple as that.

O'BRIEN: William Colby was CIA Director at the time of the agency's correspondence with Edgars Laipenicks. Colby says

he does not recall the specifics of the case, but admits that the CIA intervened on Laipenicks' behalf.

We asked him about the agency's relationship with alleged Nazi war criminals.

WILLIAM COLBY: What I'm saying here is that I don't want to say, "No, we wouldn't touch one -- a man who collaborated with the Nazis with a ten-foot pole," because that would be false. And on the other hand, I don't want to be understood as saying, "Well, we don't care about these things," because we do care about them.

Now, that leaves a rather wide spectrum. And just where on the spectrum we end up with a particular -- in respect to any one particular case I think is a judgment call. It's a question. And if you look at it in retrospect, maybe we've even made some mistakes on it. I don't know.

O'BRIEN: Two conclusions can be drawn from all of this. First, the majority of alleged Nazi war criminals living in this country may have managed to avoid deportation because of simple negligence by the Immigration Service. And second, at least some of them may have been protected by influential friends, including intelligence agencies of the United States Government.

REP. ELIZABETH HOLTZMAN: Here we are admitting, with the knowledge of government officials, people who are alleged to have participated in mass murder -- not the murder of one person, but murder of thousands of people. We let them come here. We let them stay here. We let them become citizens.

And it is a sordid chapter, because this was done in secrecy. This was never done with the consent of Congress. It was never done with the consent of the American people. And it was something that was contrary to what we stand for as a nation, and certainly a sordid, ironic postscript to those Americans who gave their lives to put an end to what Hitler was doing and to stop him. Now we find those people who were Hitler's henchmen back in this country. It's outrageous.